The Primary Language Curriculum

The Human Gift of Language
Humans are born with a unique capacity for developing language. This capacity is born of an innate human tendency and desire to communicate our ideas. Modern research has found that some animal species have the ability for more sophisticated communication than we originally believed, but the human capacity to process information, think about this information, and form and express abstract thoughts remains unparalleled.

This human tendency to communicate fuels the young child’s fascination and efforts to perfect his or her language skills. From the early formation of words to the expression of thought in writing, the young child explores his or her language with a passion.

Purpose of the Montessori Language Area
The goal of the Montessori Language area is to support the child’s natural process for acquiring and perfecting language. For the young child, language is something to be discovered and created rather than learned. Adults can support this natural development by providing language rich environments and by serving as good models of the spoken language.

When the child enters the Montessori Early Childhood classroom at 2½ or 3 years of age, she is at the peak of the sensitive period for language development. During this time the child can learn his or her native language or several other languages with ease and more fluency than at any other period of life.

Through the power of the absorbent mind, the young child can take in everything she hears. She is hungry for words and attracted to the symbols that are used to express them. When provided with an environment designed for exploration of language, children will expand their vocabulary, develop greater skills of self-expression, and often learn to read and write with the same natural ease that they learn to speak.

The Montessori environment is designed to support the development of both receptive and expressive language skills. Receptive language is the ability to hear or read ideas communicated and process the information so that one can respond appropriately. Expressive language is the ability to communicate one’s ideas to others. Both receptive and expressive language skills are developed through engaging the child in conversation, telling stories and sharing literature, listening to the child and encouraging self-expression.

Basic Sequence of the Child’s Work in the Language Area
The development of writing involves two distinct processes;
• **Motoric or mechanical development** or development of the muscular and physical skills needed for forming letters and using a tool to write
Motoric development specifically involves the strengthening of the hand muscles, the development of the pincer grip, and coordination of the hand, including the use of writing tools.

- Practical Life and Sensorial activities such as work with the metal insets, cutting with scissors, push pin work, etc. Motoric development also includes the child’s work with the sandpaper letters.

While the child is working to prepare the hand for writing the second process of writing development, the intellectual process continues to develop. Children work with a variety of activities for development of phonemic awareness, hearing the distinct letter sounds in words and for associating the sounds with the symbols. Eventually the child begins to construct words with the moveable alphabet. This is the process of encoding all the individual sounds in words. Children do not have to wait until they have learned all the letter sounds to begin this process of encoding. Once they know 8-10 sounds and are hearing the sounds in words they can begin word construction. Initially, this is done with the teacher dictating the words, but eventually can be done independently with the use of pictures or objects. Children are encouraged to communicate their ideas, constructing words, phrases, sentences, and stories phonetically, as they hear them.

- **Intellectual development** or the abstract understanding of a symbol or letter representing the letter sounds in words.

This abstract understanding of letter sounds and symbols leads to the communication of ideas through writing. The child’s work in the Montessori environment will involve activities to develop both these processes.

It is important to note that the moveable alphabet enables the child to do this creative writing work before the mastery of the writing tool. Remember that these are two distinctly different processes.

**Children will often be able to write words with the moveable alphabet before they are comfortable and confident with the mechanical formation of letters.**

Children will typically first develop the skills of writing, often the intellectual before motoric and very naturally and spontaneously move into reading. Reading in this case is defined as the decoding of words or the fusing of letter sounds to communicate an idea. The goal of our work in the Montessori language area is to support the development of “Total Reading.” Reading is an interpretation of an idea by means of graphic symbols. Total reading is an understanding of the whole of what is read. This complete reading requires us to present activities that take the child beyond the mechanics of reading individual words to include reading comprehension and the understanding of the relationship of words.

Total reading concepts in a Montessori classroom include lessons for:

**Auditory Discrimination**- involves the training of the child’s ear to hear letter sounds and develop phonemic awareness.
**Visual Discrimination** - involves seeing and recognizing letter shapes and word patterns. It also involves the training of the eyes for left to right tracking necessary for both writing and reading.

**Concept Development** - supports the development of thinking skills that will help prepare the mind for reading comprehension.

Once the child begins to fuse the sounds together to read words he progresses through a series of work that encourages reading of words, phrases, and sentences for short vowels, blends, long vowels and phonograms.

Reading labels throughout the classroom also helps the child make the leap from strictly phonetic reading of individual sounds to whole word reading.

Children also expand their reading skills with grammar lessons.

Children will then symbolize words and phrases matching the appropriate symbols to words according to their grammar function.

Finally, the most advanced stages of reading work at the Primary level include lessons for learning about punctuation, alphabetical order, and word study lessons which work with such things as compound words, suffixes, and prefixes.

Children, who have the advantage of spending three years in a Montessori Early Childhood classroom or who enter later, but work on the language materials with great enthusiasm, are likely to make amazing progress in the development of reading and writing. These children typically move to very advanced use of language. Reading becomes a gateway to exploring topics of interest and writing skills lead to the development of simple research projects and creative story telling.

Language is a continuous creative process. It should never become a chore, a thing that must be done. It is born from the enthusiasm and sense of wonder sparked by the sensitive period for language. Through the guidance and support of the Montessori teacher/guide the child is aided in his natural process of discovery of himself and the world through language. Language is the key which unlocks the doors to knowledge in every direction.

**Handwriting**

Dr. Montessori suggests an advantage of teaching cursive to the young child is that they will perfect their writing during the sensitive period. In today’s world the role of cursive writing is unclear. Some traditional schools have abandoned it altogether. Others teach cursive penmanship in elementary school, only for it to be put aside once the child develops computer key boarding skills and can type his work. The art of fine penmanship seems to have been lost and most adults write with a mixture of print and cursive, or write rarely preferring to communicate in type. Cursive was the way written language was originally taught in the Montessori environment. It was easier for the child, and therefore allowed the child to experience more success. While many public schools are abandoning cursive, we believe in its benefits. Children are introduced to cursive as the way that people write and then taught to match cursive with manuscript which is what machines produce. At this young age this is very easily done.